2.0 DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action consists of dredging a new straight channel, 35 feet deep, 600 feet wide, and approximately two miles long, to replace the Tolchester Channel S-Turn. The Tolchester Channel is maintained to a depth of -35 feet mean lower low water (MLLW) and a width of 600 feet, with necessary widening of the turns. The Baltimore District includes an additional two feet of advanced maintenance dredging in its contracts to help ensure that the 35-foot project depth is maintained between dredging cycles. Dredging contractors are also allowed an additional two feet of allowable overdepth dredging to ensure that required channel dimensions are achieved, but the contractors are not required to remove this material and usually do not dredge all of the allowable overdepth. Dredging of the proposed realignment will be accomplished in the same manner and would deepen the area from the current depths (-23 to -28 feet) to -35 feet. These depths will be maintained periodically by maintenance dredging.

Approximately three million cubic yards (mcy) of material, consisting primarily of generally soft, highly plastic, silty clay with occasional shell fragments, sand, gravel, cobbles and wood pieces would be dredged by clamshell dredges and loaded into scows. The dredged material would be towed in scows to the placement site and hydraulically unloaded directly from the scows into the placement site. The State of Maryland will provide either the 640-acre Phase I of the 1,140-acre Poplar Island Environmental Restoration Project (located in Talbot County) or the 800-acre North Cell of the 1,140-acre HMI Containment Facility (located in the upper Chesapeake Bay near the mouth of Back River in Baltimore County) for the placement of material from the proposed dredging to straighten the S-Turn. The proposed realignment is estimated to decrease average annual maintenance dredging of the Tolchester Channel by 43,000 cubic yards (cy) from 185,600 cy to 142,600 cy, which is a 23 percent reduction in average annual maintenance dredging quantities. Maintenance dredging of the Tolchester Channel is usually performed every 2 years. The new channel would be cut west of the existing S-Turn, resulting in some sections of the channel being nearly one-half mile farther from shore than the existing channel and vessel traffic being farther from shore. The dredging would be scheduled to occur between October 1 and March 31 in order to minimize impacts to fisheries and shellfish resources during spawning and nursery activities, minimize disruptions to fishing activities in the area, and to minimize nutrient releases. Poplar Island and/or HMI will generally be used for future maintenance dredging until the capacity is exhausted or until a new placement site is brought on line. Under present conditions (i.e., use of Poplar Island or HMI), there is adequate planned capacity to maintain this and other approach channels for approximately eight to nine years.

The estimated cost of the project is $13.9 million ($12.5 million Federal costs for dredging/$1.4 million non-Federal costs for placement).

2.1 COMPLETED AND ONGOING PROJECTS

All of the improvements to the Baltimore Harbor & Channels project authorized by the R&H Act of 1958 have been constructed with the exception of widening the western five

miles of the Brewerton Channel Eastern Extension from 450 to 600 feet (which is expected to be completed in June 2001). The River and Harbor Act of 1970 authorized improvements to the Baltimore Harbor & Channels project, which included deepening the main approach channels from 42 to 50 feet deep and deepening some of the branch channels. All of the improvements to the Baltimore Harbor & Channels project authorized by the R&H Act of 1970 have been constructed with the exception of widening the York Spit and Rappahannock Shoal Channels in Virginia from 800 to 1,000 feet, widening the Maryland main channels from 700 to 800 feet and widening the Curtis Bay Channel from 400 to 600 feet wide. The WRDA of 1999 authorized straightening of the Tolchester Channel S-Turn (the proposed project), which is scheduled to begin in Fall 2001. The Baltimore Harbor Anchorages and Channels project was authorized by the WRDA of 1998 and provides for deepening and widening anchorages and branch channels and providing a turning basin in the Port. Dredging is scheduled to begin in the Fall 2001 and be completed in the spring 2003. Another project being studied by USACE Philadelphia District is the proposed deepening of the C&D Canal to 40 feet. The study for this project has been deferred for three years.

These ongoing projects are being addressed in the Baltimore District's Dredged Material Management Plan Preliminary Assessment (scheduled for completion in spring 2001) and were considered in the planning needs that formed the basis for the *State of Maryland Strategic Plan for Dredged Material Management* (MPA 1996). The Strategic Plan is supported by a formal statement of cooperation among several State and Federal agencies to assure full opportunity for review of each proposed dredged material placement site without pre-judgment and with recognition that each placement action would need to be considered in compliance with applicable laws and regulations (MDOT 1996a).